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## **Truth communication in times of digital abundance : a practical theological perspective**

Schlag, Thomas

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## Digital Humanities in Biblical Studies and Theology

Thomas Schlag\*

# Truth Communication in Times of Digital Abundance: A Practical Theological Perspective

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**Abstract:** Digital providers inundate their users with an abundance of words, as well as pictorial and iconic information that has long become almost unmanageable. In terms of religious communicative usage, there are some indications that a new, perhaps even disruptive quality is being introduced into these digital practices, particularly with regard to truth communication. For both the individual actors and their places of lived religion and religious communication, the claim to truth expressed in each case is influenced by the very dynamics of digital use. Against this background, the basic question arises of whether a practical-theological reflection in the mode of a critical observation of these digital dynamics is conceivable at all. Therefore, I examine the current dynamics of digital media use in more detail by focusing on the anthropologically and theologically relevant concept of “searching” in a fundamental sense. The question arises of whether the implied, highly intensive and independent religious search developments are actually able to represent and promise in their entirety that “truth” which can be meaningfully searched for and found according to theological understanding. From these reflections on a practical public theology, some exemplary consequences for the field of religious educational practice are subsequently pointed out. I argue that, in the sense of cultivating critical perception and interpretation competence, an awareness of the significance of this abundance of analogous expressions and behaviors should be created in concrete educational processes. But an awareness should also be created of the relevance of developing an identity and a personal relationality in the digital world, shaped by the theological idea not only of “searching,” but of “finding” and “being found.”

**Keywords:** religious digital practice; public theology; practical theology; communication; truth

## 1 The phenomenon of digital abundance

Around 300 billion mails are sent worldwide every day.<sup>1</sup> And every day people watch over 1 billion hours of YouTube videos. On YouTube alone, 400 hours of video material are uploaded every minute.<sup>2</sup> The data volume of the internet doubles about every two years. In the year 2025, around 163 Zettabytes – 163 with twenty-one zeros – of data will be generated worldwide, ten times as much as in 2016. For clarification, this amount would correspond to all the series and films currently stored at Netflix multiplied by 500 million.

1 Cf. <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/252278/umfrage/prognose-zur-zahl-der-taeglich-versendeter-e-mails-weltweit/> [accessed 1 June 2019].

2 Cf. <https://www.brandwatch.com/de/blog/statistiken-youtube/> [accessed 1 June 2019].

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The average internet user spends about six hours a day with internet-enabled devices and services. This corresponds to about one third of a person's waking state. If one adds up this time for all internet users worldwide, currently around 4 billion, this results in a total time of use of 1 billion years for 2018 alone.<sup>3</sup>

Digital providers inundate their users with an abundance of words, as well as pictorial and iconic information, a quantity that has long become unmanageable. Due to simplified technical access, information is ubiquitous in terms of both time and space; it is nearly always available. What information can actually be used amounts to only a fraction of the actual volume. And that volume is always expanding, constantly opening up new horizons, and appearing in different guises with different truth claims.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, in many cases it is no longer necessary for the individual to make a deliberate decision in order to select from the existing range, as may have been the case in analogue times. Instead, what can be read or seen or heard is offered according to a logic that the users themselves have contributed to and partly influence. This logic becomes increasingly self-evident and more entrenched with every new click. Much of the information available to users is no longer consciously chosen, but results from what has been selected at some point before: "you don't choose to enter the bubble. They [personalized filters] come to you – and because they drive up profits for the Web sites that use them, they'll become harder and harder to avoid."<sup>5</sup> This is evidenced by the relocation of data sources. By 2025, a large proportion of the data will not be generated by private users as before, but by companies.<sup>6</sup> The saying "the future of the web is about personalization"<sup>7</sup> does not reflect a sovereign decision by users, but is primarily based on economic interests. Such personalized use results from economically motivated profiling, to which the individual contributes with every new decision to search and select. The constantly changing shape of the truth being offered is controlled by the offer itself.

At the same time, these dynamics promote intensive emotional and motivational forms of use: new things only have a chance of meeting with approval if they correspond to and confirm what one already knows or suspects in one's own filter bubble.<sup>8</sup> What is received digitally often corresponds exactly to what is already expected subconsciously, to what is believed to be true. And the inverse also applies: what has not yet been in the focus of interest usually fails to capture one's attention. The disturbing and the irritating are only perceived if they can serve as negative evidence for one's own view of the world. At the same time, stimuli must be increased if the same thing is to continue to draw attention.

Even if it is not yet clear whether the new digital media trigger these dynamics, there are some indications that a new, disruptive quality is being introduced into digital practices. For our case, focusing on religious practice, this is especially true with regard to truth communication. Thus the original sense of enlightenment through the medium, once euphorically assumed, has itself been lost: "today the Internet is in many places a gigantic emotion machine, in which knowledge is not in the foreground, but full entertainment according to the rules of the boulevard. Whoever stirs up emotion wins the battle for attention: cat video beats nature documentary. Rage speech beats differentiated reasoning. And fiction often suppresses truth."<sup>9</sup>

In this respect, the network's main rationale and idea is to keep the assertion of truth verifiable and not to evade critical debate. Kevin Kelly, co-founder of *Wired* magazine, says: "Truth is no longer dictated by authorities, but is networked by peers. For every fact there is a counterfact. All those counterfactuals and facts look identical online, which is confusing to most people."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. <https://wearesocial.com/de/blog/2018/01/global-digital-report-2018> [accessed 1 June 2019].

<sup>4</sup> Levmore and Nussbaum, *The Offensive Internet*.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of their possible, but perhaps also overestimated, polarizing effects see Dubois and Blank, "The Echo Chamber is Overstated."

<sup>6</sup> Cf. <https://blog.wiwo.de/look-at-it/2017/04/04/weltweite-datenmengen-verzehnfachen-sich-bis-zum-jahr-2025-gegenueber-heute/> [accessed 1 June 2019].

<sup>7</sup> So Tapan Bhat, Vice President of Yahoo, in [http://www.lse.ac.uk/assets/richmedia/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/slides/20110620\\_1830\\_theFilterBubble\\_sl.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/assets/richmedia/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/slides/20110620_1830_theFilterBubble_sl.pdf) [accessed 1 June 2019].

<sup>8</sup> Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*.

<sup>9</sup> Müller von Blumencron, "Trennt Propaganda von Wahrheit!" However, it must be asked whether the phenomenon of cat videos – which here *pars pro toto* stand for a whole entertainment genre – can at least indirectly include a search for truth, and whether it represents "only" the search for a healthy, "sweet," natural world.

<sup>10</sup> Gray, "Lies, Propaganda, and Fake News."

“Digital prosumers” not only think and see and live in pre-programmed worlds, but they have also become firmly established in them “for themselves.” One’s own opinion is formed to the point where one’s digitally individualized information horizon draws the boundary, which in turn has significant political relevance: “The seemingly public nature of the seeker is creepingly privatized in the private interest of the provider, who acts as a citizen, actually as a customer who can no longer be expected to accept another of one’s own position – and who is no longer able to find it either.”<sup>11</sup> This makes the search for truth in discourse at best only possible in a narrow sense.

The freedom of dealing with a wealth of information threatens to give way to the lack of freedom of preliminary decisions having long been made elsewhere. The images, words, and signs on the worldwide web are not only available to be received by the individual at all times, but are also predictable, lack surprise and spontaneity, and incite a lack of expectation which is self-determined. And this is probably not only true for secular content, but even more so for religious content within the digital realm.

## 2 Challenges for Practical Theology

Against this seemingly unchangeable background, the basic question arises of whether a practical-theological reflection in the mode of critical observation is conceivable at all. Can the digital abundance of images, words, and signs be interpreted in such a way that an alternative method of assessment still makes sense? Does the overall digital context therefore not require any further decoding because everything essential is already directly before the eye of the beholder, especially if the beholder invokes his constitutional right to (religious) freedom of opinion, information, and practice? If theology were to go ahead, would it now once again raise the moral index finger in an anti-technology orientation and with a fundamental unease about digital culture? Would it try to convince individual users of “something better,” which would once again be a repetition of the familiar cardinal error of theological crisis semantics and a way of distancing itself from modern developments?

The following considerations are not intended to be an overly predictable way of notching up fundamental criticism. And yet the question of how these digital forms are to be assessed is anything but secondary. Because, for both the individual actors and their places of lived religion and religious communication, the claim to truth expressed in each case is influenced in a life-shaping way by the dynamics of digital use.

In fact, the practical-theological approach to the religious reality of the world is based on an ability to plausibly distinguish the essential from the unessential, truth claims from fake news. This becomes possible by means of concrete interpersonal arguments and reasoning, or at least by productive promotion of an awareness that discernible, self-critical, and mature consciousness is required. Practical theology as a specific scientific approach to understanding Christian practice is in demand, not only in view of individual lifestyles, but also in light of the collective dynamics of religious and ecclesiastical provenance. In accordance with the recent dynamics of a so-called “Public Theology”<sup>12</sup> and “Public Church,”<sup>13</sup> this specific disciplinary approach and its scientific objectives can be understood as a manifestation of “Public Practical Theology,” putting forth concrete arguments and reasoning in the perspective of “serving life” (*Lebensdienlichkeit*).

Now this term “serving life” might appear rather vague. Nonetheless, it can be a helpful interpretative perspective for practical theology as an academic discipline. This is precisely the case when, questions about “the truth” are repeatedly asked in an interpretive manner. Which forms of digital religious practice make life-serving humanity possible, and which are more likely to be regarded as life-destroying? In this sense, public practical theology is understood as the theoretical reflection of the practical challenges and practices of digital theology as “intentional, sustained and reflexive theologically-resourced engagement with digitality/digital culture.”<sup>14</sup>

11 Meireis, “O dass ich tausend Zungen hätte,” 55–56.

12 See Oorschot, “Making Public Theology Operational”; Brunn, *Raum. Kirche. Öffentlichkeit*.

13 See Schlag, *Öffentliche Kirche*.

14 Philipps, Schiefelbein-Guerrero, and Kurlberg, “Defining Digital Theology,” 39.

Consequently, this approach is based on an understanding of truth that is not fixed from the outset by certain dogmatic propositional truths. Rather, the search for the truth of life is itself always connected with a possible abundance of different perspectives.<sup>15</sup> The fact that in each individual case a dispute between interpretations – especially about the possible understanding of truth – breaks out does not speak against the approach of public practical theology, but reveals the life-relevant approach of this academic theological reflection.<sup>16</sup>

Such theological reflection, then, should not be understood as the only possible or even ultimate interpretation, but as a *useful* interpretation. Such interpretation can be characterized by a specific competence of distinction, avoiding both euphoric and apocalyptic voices.<sup>17</sup> So if practical-theological reflection intends to contribute to the interpretation of life and to the associated theological practice of interpretation in the light of one's understanding of truth, it will have to deal intensively with the developments of the digital age.

But in order to perceive the digital dynamics adequately, and to be able to assess them theologically and ethically, observational and evaluation criteria are needed. It is precisely in this sense that theological reflection on digital life and communication contexts is as meaningful as it is necessary. The following considerations are intended to provide a first move in this direction. To this end, I examine the current dynamics of digital media use in more detail by focusing on the anthropologically and theologically relevant concept of “searching” in a fundamental sense, in order to subsequently point out some consequences for the field of religious educational practice.

### 3 Search developments in a culture of digitality

In an initial sense, “searching” can be understood as a fundamental and inherent characteristic of human beings. Humans search for answers for their own benefit and to meaningfully orient their lives. The installation “My Search Queries” by the artist Max Julian Fischer provides a vivid picture of these phenomena: A mountain of shredded strips of paper spreads out on the floor, rising and falling like a living being in a heartbeat rhythm through an artificial impulse. The text accompanying this installation reads: “My search queries document my interests. They tell a story of the things I wonder about. About the things I want and the things I think I need. My search queries document my journey on the net. I downloaded these searches from my Google Cloud account. Printed. And shredded.”<sup>18</sup>

Humans have been searching from the outset, and to this extent human life has always demanded orientation. Life questions are always being renewed. The “interests” of the artist Fischer extend into his individual life plan or are closely connected with it. Searching manifests the incompleteness of one's own existence, which in view of the respective circumstances of life requires reassurance. In this sense “searching” also has to be understood as a dynamic movement of the individual as it develops and changes. And “development” itself is understood as an anthropological term in so far as it describes an internal process of feelings and thoughts, as well as external processes of expression, be it through language, action, or the body.

Our first search dynamics are initially directed towards quite elementary processes, such as the first crawling, hearing, groping, walking orientations in space. With an increasing ability to reflect, searching is then also directed toward the development of one's identity, the formation of trust, and the expansion of possibilities for action and design.

In the course of individual development, this is combined with the search for principles to underlie individual living, the search for meaning, for answers to the questions of living together, the search for justice, and also for answers to the questions of good, truth, and God himself. In the horizon of a culture

<sup>15</sup> See Dalferth and Stoellger, *Wahrheit in Perspektiven*.

<sup>16</sup> See in more detail Schlag, “Religionspädagogik als Lebenswissenschaft.”

<sup>17</sup> One thinks here of the different theological positions from a more recent time, for instance of Haberer, *Digitale Theologie*, or Jung, *Digital Mensch bleiben*, or Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*.

<sup>18</sup> Fischer, *Meine Suchanfragen*.



of digitality,<sup>19</sup> this elementary human search can also be traced microscopically, so to speak, for digital practice: the search developments detectable here do not emerge linearly, one leading to the next, but are often mutually complementary.

On a first comparatively superficial level, this practice actually serves the initial acquisition of *information and knowledge* via a search function, but also the search for *fun, entertainment, and distraction*.<sup>20</sup> In an often consciously playful way, the medium is opened up through its haptic possibilities, whereby *search and addiction* may appear close together through certain technical possibilities, such as “like buttons,” that offer subtle emotional rewards.<sup>21</sup>

In a second, further-reaching sense, a more *personal* and *participative* element can be seen insofar as digital practice focuses on active participation, creative forms of design, and participation in certain media networks and forums. Interestingly, programs in which one’s own name – for example as a “user name” or as a password – is required encourage something like the first formation of identity to take place. One could thus speak here of a *search development* toward *personal participation and identity-related solidarity, and thus at the same time toward relationship and community*.<sup>22</sup>

From these first baby steps of participation, such *individual* forms of representation emerge at the same time as a further search dimension in which the search for one’s own identity moves more to the centre stage. One thinks here of “selfie culture,”<sup>23</sup> which now begins as early as the pre-teens, as well as the establishment of personal accounts. Thus, certain motives for use bear clear traits of the search for recognition, for confirmation, possibly also combined with expression of a perfect exterior image.

In connection with this, and also going one step further, such forms of representation already open up the far-reaching *personal search* for health, happiness, and love, for a certain form of security and meaningful life experiences.<sup>24</sup> And finally, in the sense of a more *content-oriented search for orientation*, essential questions of certainty and truth can be raised, including also dimensions of religion, transcendence, eternity, and faith.

Such search developments are by no means exclusive to the use of digital media. As vital, “truth-oriented” orientation practices, these are, seen anthropologically, basic phenomena for the conduct of life which are not bound to digital formats and are certainly not exclusively connected to them. In view of the repeatedly raised question of the disruptive quality of new media, it should be noted at this point that the media upheavals from analogue to digital are “not absolute cuts and cracks, but rearrangements of complex constellations.”<sup>25</sup> And yet it is precisely through these digital forms of communication that dynamics and possibilities emerge which have a new quality in terms of their extent and diversity, intensity and speed, accessibility, and (supposed) accuracy.

In order to take up the aforementioned basic practical-theological questions once again, it is necessary to ask how, from this perspective, the digitally induced or at least intensified search developments and the

19 Stalder, *Kultur der Digitalität*.

20 51% of adult Americans use YouTube for “figuring out how to do things they haven’t done before”; 28% for “just passing time”; and 19% for “understanding things happening in the world.” Survey of U.S. adults conducted 29 May to 11 June 2018, <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/11/07/many-turn-to-youtube-for-childrens-content-news-how-to-lessons/> [accessed 15 May 2019].

21 See the corresponding psychological backgrounds of these very conscious technical applications in Spiekermann, *Digitale Ethik*, 102–105; Thiede, *Digitaler Turmbau zu Babel*.

22 It is no coincidence, therefore, that for about fifteen years a research field has been established under the label “Digital Religion,” which mainly originates from the Anglo-Saxon area, especially on questions surrounding the connection between religion and digitalization, and which should intensively be taken into consideration by practical theology. The studies in recent years that focused on manifestations of, and the concept of, community are particularly revealing for the reflective tasks of practical theology. See Campbell, *Religion and the Internet*, and, more systematically, Cheong, *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture*.

23 Gojny, Kürzinger, and Schwarz, *Selfie*.

24 In terms of professional theory, this has been demonstrated in recent years by the fact that the internet is now being used intensively as a source of advice on medical and legal issues. In this respect, for theology as a “positive science” (*positive Wissenschaft*) in Schleiermacher’s sense, the question also arises as to whether these search developments have long since been extended to the field of theological professionalism. To this extent, the role of the “guardians of knowledge” must also be rethought. See Spiekermann, *Digitale Ethik*, 215–222.

25 Schröter, “Analog/Digital,” 29.

associated searches for truth can be dealt with in a critical-constructive manner. The question arises as to whether the implied, highly intensive, and independent search developments are actually able to represent in their entirety that “truth” which can be meaningfully searched for and found according to theological understanding.

For, in fact, the impression is being created that through the digital possibilities and their manifold abundance of words, images, and signs, the burden of proof regarding the communication of truth has entirely shifted to the place and responsibility of the digitally active individual. However, this is associated with a number of problems at all levels of individual searches. On the one hand, technically programmed and programmatically unlimited freedom is always determined by certain algorithms according to corporate control over media content and thus to individual access and orientation processes, even externally determining them. On the other hand, with regard to the aspect of “personalization,” the broader question arises as to what significance digital media use can actually claim for itself in the individual search for identity and relevance to life if “the digital network is thus permanently filling us with virtual impulses from everywhere and nowhere.”<sup>26</sup> But what does practical theological reflection regarding the “search term” have to offer in terms of content?

## 4 Searching as a basic Protestant attitude of promised passivity

First of all, it should be noted that central biblical traditions could be enumerated and illuminated in a highly revealing sense in light of the developments and dynamics of searching. This cannot and must not be performed here in detail. Nevertheless, it would be extremely worthwhile to play through the different elements of the abovementioned search as a foil for the interpretation of central biblical texts or their linguistic, iconic, and symbolic programmes.

But even if one refers to certain biblical traditions, absolute truth should never be claimed because all individual interpretations do not give final answers to the “burning questions” of life, but rather open up new possibilities for further interpretation. Therefore, a theological understanding of truth, despite its claim to life orientation, cannot claim more than to be itself a certain perspective of truth. In this respect it has to prove itself again and again through a certain life-serving public practice and has to remain open to critical discussion.

But what can be said in general terms here is that, beyond the different elements of transmission, an unmistakable theological meaning can be identified in that these search developments are always surrounded by the life-relevant concept of *finding*. To formulate this even more precisely: the human attempt to find the decisive thing is based on a hope of *being found*. In this respect, the creative centre of human life is not its own activity, but the “deep passivity of our existence. Most of what we are, we don’t owe to ourselves.”<sup>27</sup> The intention to become certain of *oneself, in and because of all the freedom of the Gospel’s promise*, gains its meaning only from the experience of knowing, in one’s own questions and searches, prior to certainty from somewhere else.

The intensively documented search for orientation in the Bible – for example, the highly emotional development of the Psalter, or the book of Job, or the tradition of discipleship in the New Testament – leads to an insight into the human limits of one’s own search. And it leads again to the experience that orientation can only be achieved by exposure to external stimuli. According to biblical and theological understanding, life-relevant search developments are not possible in the location of the individual or through one’s own activities. They are only possible through insight into the fundamental passivity of all human *discovery, confirmation, and orientation*.

To state it here again quite clearly: truth does not lie in the eye of the beholder but exists in its character as a gift, which enables humans to experience revelation anew.<sup>28</sup> Truth only becomes a life-relevant dimension

<sup>26</sup> Spiekermann, *Digitale Ethik*, 120.

<sup>27</sup> Dalferth, *God First*, 49–50. See also the Pauline insight: “What makes you at all to be so arrogant? Isn’t all you have a gift of God? But if it was given to you, why do you boast as if you owed it to yourself?” (1 Cor 4:7).

<sup>28</sup> On the question of Christian truth as the centre of Protestant theology see Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*.

– through whatever media – if it can be opened up to the human being beforehand, and ultimately without his or her active involvement. The working and effective word is thus not self-generated. It is expressed because it has already previously taken shape: “Christian faith lives from the effective presence of God, not from the traditional memories of a founder figure, from the life-giving Spirit of God, not from the dead letter.”<sup>29</sup> All communication of truth and all free and meaningful use of words and symbols, as well as interpretive practices connected with it, always follow a certain promise: that something will happen which is not available to or arranged by the human, but which can be ascertained by remembering and reflecting.

With this context in mind, the central question becomes how active and passive modes are represented in these searches. In fact, a highly ambivalent tension can be assumed: on the one hand, the highest activity and infinite data production takes place in the network with identity-forming significance. On the other hand, fundamental passivity is also a given due to the long-established production and orientation mechanisms of the network. In many cases you are not “in control of your own house” or personalized user interface. And yet this form of digital passivity differs substantially from the theological understanding of passivity. This is the case insofar as the dimension of unavailability is not to be equated with a loss of individual freedom because it represents the gift of freedom as its core content.<sup>30</sup>

What threatens to become fundamentally lost in digital searches is this unavailable, passive moment from which freedom can only come to itself in the first place. Access to corresponding digital content is in any case constitutively something different than the promise of what cannot be found alone. In contrast to the perceptions on the surface, which are primarily economically induced, truth communication lives from the dimension of a specific depth and its effects, which can appear totally freely because it is always present without human intervention.

Such a broader conceptualization of the “search term” can then become relevant in the horizon of current religious digital dynamics, including in practical-theological reflection. In the concluding section, this idea will be partly explained using education as a test case.

## 5 Practical-Theological consequences for an educated communication of truth

In the field of education and, in recent years, religious education, the challenges of digitalization have been considered more and more intensively, and possible future strategies for dealing with them have developed.<sup>31</sup> So it is hardly surprising that the main goal of school education is to practice media literacy as critically as possible. This is, of course, objectively appropriate, but at the same time it raises the question of what this can mean specifically for religious education, the search developments initiated by it, and its claim to truth communication, especially if religious education illuminates the modes of recognizing truth.<sup>32</sup>

Two points are to be mentioned here, related to the insight that “the Internet is currently undergoing its first real test: Will its protagonists be able to develop enough powerful mechanisms to help the Enlightenment to victory even in the age of ideologization? Global players in the network will have to be measured by this. It will no longer be enough to rely solely on the neutrality of technology.”<sup>33</sup>

It is a fundamental educational goal, in view of the undeniable fascination of digital information, to first consider the abundance of images, words, and signs offered. This includes their offers of truth, in terms of their technical, political, and economic background motivations. The fact that users are especially, and presumably primarily, consumers and buyers is something that needs to be brought to the fore again and again. What is threatened when the selection and “pre-determination” of what is significant

<sup>29</sup> Dalferth, *Wirkendes Wort*, 300.

<sup>30</sup> In secular orientation and yet with religious connotations see Rosa, *Unverfügbarkeit*.

<sup>31</sup> See for example Nord and Zipernovskiy, *Religionspädagogik*.

<sup>32</sup> See Meyer-Blanck, “Unterscheiden,” 9.

<sup>33</sup> Müller von Blumencron, “Trennt Propaganda von Wahrheit!”



is left to algorithms, especially with regard to individual search developments and the question of truth communication, can thus always be clearly addressed. Otherwise, supposed user freedom could turn out to be nothing more than expression of the greatest “unfreedom” in these highly life-relevant searches.

Secondly, there is the challenge of how to deal with digital possibilities in a free and constructive way in light of the passivity and gift character of the individual lifestyle. The “difference competence” to be developed and maintained here lies in distinguishing between the abundance of digital words, images, and signs and the vision of the “abundance of life” itself. The dimension of real personality in the place of one’s own self and the real “other,” and also the question of the truth dynamics of individual identity searches and real encounters, is not resolved by the mirroring dynamics of digital media.

In contrast to digital notions of perfectibility, the following fundamental theological-anthropological insights must be remembered: “Personal consistency is no longer to be thought of as uniformity, but rather as a composition of the different; this composition never comes to a reliable conclusion in life, but remains constantly in motion...‘identity’ does not mean that a human being ever becomes completely transparent to himself or herself, but rather that the person also contains the insight that the human being always remains a little withdrawn.”<sup>34</sup> This consciousness of constitutive deprivation and transcendental unavailability, however, brings all algorithmically induced ideas of availability to their limits.

In the sense of cultivating critical perception and interpretation competence, concrete educational processes should create an awareness of the significance of this abundance of analogous expressions and life behaviors, as well as the relevance of developing identity and personal relationality. For search developments will probably only have a life-relevant experiential dimension if they themselves can be experienced, including their physical dimension, in their entirety. Language events relevant to life are – at least for the time being – dependent on real resonances. And they cannot be replaced by supposedly essential one-dimensional digital agents. However, in order for these resonances to be discovered at all, the training of perception and attention needs to be re-trained more than ever. For “if we do not rebuild and preserve a culture of attention around our knowledge, we will eventually swim like disoriented fish in a sea of information whose goodness we can no longer judge.”<sup>35</sup>

In this context, the proposal to design the necessary search developments in the sense of the search for osmotic processes between analogue and virtual communication spaces and thus as a “search for shared realities in the plural”<sup>36</sup> in order to break through the technically induced logics of fragmentation is stimulating.

In this sense, a Protestant-informed practice of truthfulness “as a search for what is shared, but permanently different, and on the other hand as a search for what is common”<sup>37</sup> is characterized by the fact that it is able to promote itself from theologically-based criteria for digital search movements as distinctive, empathetic, and self-aware. The fact that the respective digital image, word, and sign productions each require their very own skills of approximation, deciphering and critical assessment can only be hinted at here.

In any case, for such an existential practice of interpretation, the Christian religion distinguishes itself in the realm of the justification-theological distinction of law and gospel as an “execution of consistent distinction as expression of the struggle for truth.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, according to theological understanding, the significance of the search for truth does not lie in the fact that one will find “safely” and “for oneself alone,” but that one can be sure to be found.

Such a religious self-understanding lives inside a sense of the infinite, and at the same time human, which cannot be sufficiently represented by an abundance of digital images and words. Successful truth communication must be face-to-face, containing many more experiences than are possible through even the most attractive “image-giving” experiences. Consequently, religious education in the digital age faces

<sup>34</sup> Englert, “Komposition des Differenten,” 138.

<sup>35</sup> Spiekermann, *Digitale Ethik*, 205.

<sup>36</sup> Oorschot, “Fragmentierte Öffentlichkeiten,” 92.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>38</sup> Meyer-Blanck, “Praktische Theologie,” 391.

the challenge of “developing web-based communication opportunities and relying on interactive and intersubjective learning arrangements. For what applies to the content-related examination of the object of truth also applies to the forms of teaching and learning in which this takes place: They depend on an existentially relational appropriation by those who seek it.”<sup>39</sup>

This then brings with it another important distinction based on the theology of the Reformation and productive differentiation: “It is a figure of the granted grace and corporeality of faith that the works and the insights are not necessary for justification, but are nevertheless reality in the life of the believer.”<sup>40</sup> In view of the paradox of searching and finding this means that “Protestant teaching should confront the fact that the truth sought by the subject must by definition be something that is found by oneself, but in this finding must be set as, at the same time, not accessible to construction.”<sup>41</sup>

For such a reality-conscious and educated communication of truth – requiring a final mention here – the spatial possibilities of church practice open up necessary counter-experiences. In view of virtual spaces for worship, prayer or mourning, for example, the extent to which existential searches can actually take place primarily via such virtual forms of use has to be questioned. Likewise, it has to be asked whether it is not precisely at such moments and times that experiences of personal and bodily relationality are required, experiences which cannot be made available, or only inadequately, via the internet. Of course, this does not mean that physical encounters cannot also include power forms and indoctrination dynamics. But it is to be hoped that real encounters will facilitate stronger forms of critical encounter.

Through holistic and bodily ritual experiences, through worship services of the living Word, which actually happens without any action of its own in its unavailability as freeing truth (John 8:32), completely new possibilities and scope for the attentive individual and collective search for truth open up in the midst of the digital abundance of images, words and signs. In this way, these spaces and the events taking place in them can be discovered in their meaning of life – which in turn is made accessible through the “sense of hearing and face...also the sense of smell, taste and touch.”<sup>42</sup> It thus becomes clear that the personal search for truth cannot be digitally pretended. But that individuals from the almost infinite abundance of “the net” are able to grasp and understand what is essential for them, precisely by spelling out their own searches and being found “for themselves” in complete freedom, communicating collectively and thus understanding life in a meaningful way.

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<sup>39</sup> Nord, “Die Wahrheit,” 223.

<sup>40</sup> Meyer-Blanck, “Unterscheiden,” 18.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>42</sup> Meyer-Blanck, *Gottesdienstlehre*, 133.

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